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C O N F I D E N T I A L BRATISLAVA 000854

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: HZDS: OLD DOG MECIAR CAN STILL LEARN NEW TRICKS

Classified By: Ambassador Rodolphe M. Vallee for Reasons
1.4 (B) and (D).

1. (C) SUMMARY: During an October 19 lunch, HZDS leadership (minus Meciar, whom we did not invite) told Ambassador that the party cannot exist without Vladimir Meciar, that they are working "behind the scenes" to reach out to the current coalition, that Meciar (an "old dog who can still learn new tricks") has ruled out ever serving as Prime Minister again, and that the party will instead consider "success" in next year's elections the return of HZDS to a ruling coalition. Despite the overtures they are making to the current coalition of SDKU, SMK, and KDH, the HZDS leadership told us that they cannot rule out any course of action. Still, when asked to look into the crystal ball and predict what the government will look like in a year, almost all agreed that it will involve a partnership between HZDS and SDKU. END SUMMARY.

MECIAR'S EMISSARY: WE'RE REACHING OUT TO THE COALITION

2. (C) During an October 19 lunch with HZDS MPs Milan Urbani, Tibor Mikus, Katarina Tothova, and Diana Strofova, Urbani -- Meciar's designated "emissary" to the United States Embassy -- told us that HZDS is growing in popularity, particularly with the young and the "forty-something" crowd. The MPs speculated that this bump was due to Slovaks finally getting over the mistakes of the 1990's, when Tothova -- then Minister of Justice -- said disingenuously that HZDS was forced to make "bad concessions" to its then-coalition partners, particularly SNS. (Comment: Tothova was the most unreconstructed of the group. End Comment). Tothova said that she could see HZDS working together with Prime Minister Dzurinda's SDKU party, and Urbani, who had opened the luncheon by saying that all options were on the table for HZDS in the upcoming elections, tipped his hand and admitted that HZDS was reaching out to the current coalition. Urbani was particularly interested in how the United States would react to a SDKU-SMK-KDH-HZDS coalition government; the Ambassador told Urbani that the USG is interested in having Slovaks choose their own leaders in an election that is free, fair, and transparent. He also laid down a marker on Meciar's past transgressions and expressed our support for many of the policies Slovakia has followed since Meciar's fall.

3. (C) While the MPs admitted that Meciar is an "old dog," they had faith in his ability to learn "new tricks" in the upcoming political campaign season. While Strofova -- a 32 year old new mother -- waxed sentimental about Meciar's role as the "father of our country," the other MPs seemed unmoved by her passionate display of loyalty. Urbani admitted, however, that it is Meciar, and not HZDS, that does well at the polls; without Meciar, Urbani felt the party would suffer significantly. Clearly, there is no HZDS without its unchallenged boss.

MECIAR WANTS POWER, BUT NOT RESPONSIBILITY

4. (C) The MPs outlined their party as built upon three "pillars:" "We are a Christian party, a nationalist party, and a party that believes in social capitalism," Urbani said. With an aggressive and well-defined outline of what reforms it feels should be continued, and what should be rolled back, the members clearly spoke from the perspective of their traditional voter base in rural and eastern Slovakia, where joblessness remains a problem and wages currently hover at around 40 percent of the EU-25 average. When asked about what would constitute "success" for Meciar, the MPs said "power." When asked to clarify, they admitted that Meciar wants HZDS to be in the ruling coalition again -- and is actively pursuing partnership with SDKU, SMK, and KDH to get there -- but that Meciar himself does not aspire to be Prime Minister (or any other Minister, for that matter) again. Urbani told the Ambassador that Meciar has on no fewer than three occasions assured him that he does not want to be in power again. Urbani smiled coyly when we asked if Meciar was angling to be Chairman of the Parliament.

THE BIG QUESTION: WHEN CAN MECIAR MEET THE AMBASSADOR?

5. (C) Following the lunch, Urbani pulled the Ambassador

aside to ask "when (Urbani) might be able to tell the
Chairman he can meet (the Ambassador)." The Ambassador told
him the time wasn't right.
VALLEE

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